Language and Anxiety: Anxiety Sources, Coping, and EFL Learning

Po-Chi Kao1,2, *, Philip Craigie3

1 General Education Center, Chang Gung University, Taoyuan, Taiwan
2 Linkou Branch, Chang Gung Memorial Hospital, Taoyuan, Taiwan
3 Independent Researcher, Melbourne, Australia

Email address
mk@mail.cgu.edu.tw (Po-Chi Kao)
*Corresponding author

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Abstract: This study systematically and comprehensively reviews previous literature in the investigation of language and anxiety. In this review study, three types of performance anxiety related with foreign language acquisition were identified. In addition, several explanations to the development of communication apprehension were given. Three possible relationships between anxiety and language learning were pinpointed. Several potential sources of language anxiety were found. In the end, we reviewed previous studies of how individuals cope with language anxiety and identified strategies used by teachers to help students alleviate communication apprehension as well as pinpointed effective and ineffective strategies used by learners to cope with foreign language learning anxiety. It is hoped that findings of this review study will provide valuable information with significant theoretical and practical importance to increase the understanding of language and anxiety.

Keywords: Anxiety, Foreign Language, Anxiety Sources, Coping, EFL Learning

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to review the role of anxiety in the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL), to explore the sources of language anxiety, as well as to identify how individuals cope with it. This study systematically and critically reviews previous literature. Sources of our data include academic publications and scholarly web resources. The results of this study are expected to aid the understanding of anxiety and language, hopefully leading to the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework of anxiety in foreign language acquisition.

2. Language and Anxiety

Horwitz [1] defined anxiety as the subjective feeling of nervousness, apprehension, tension, and worry that occurs when the autonomic nervous system is stimulated. Early research has shown that the connection between anxiety and language learning cannot be simply interpreted nor is it well-understood [2]. It was not until Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope [3] that proposed possibly the most important theory of language anxiety, which gave us a better understanding of how anxiety can influence the language acquisition process. Anxiety in language learning can be examined using two approaches [4]. In the first approach, language learning anxiety is viewed as an expression of other general forms of anxiety, and anxiety experienced in language learning is explained using general types of anxiety. Whereas in the second approach, language anxiety is regarded as a distinctive form of anxiety peculiar to language learning. The second approach was adopted by Horwitz et al. [3] who proposed a situation-specific anxiety concept called “Foreign Language Anxiety,” which refers to a psychological condition experienced by individuals when learning a foreign or second language.

Three types of performance anxieties were suggested by Horwitz et al. [3] to be associated with foreign language anxiety, and these include test anxiety, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation (See Figure 1). Test anxiety emanates from a fear of failure [3]. In various types of foreign language tests, most learners tend to set certain test scores for themselves, and as such, they are afraid of falling below that level of performance. It was indicated
by Young [5] that the learners’ incorrect beliefs about language proficiency may be linked to test anxiety. In particular, learners are likely to feel more anxious when taking a language test if they believe that test scores give an indication of their levels of achievement in foreign language learning.

Communication apprehension is often regarded as a type of shyness caused by the fear of speaking with others. It was defined by McCroskey [6] as a person’s level of anxiety or fear in relation with anticipated or real communication with other people orally or in other forms. It is one of the main causes of anxiety in learning a foreign language because individuals who find it difficult to speak to others are more likely to encounter greater challenges in learning to speak a foreign language [3]. Five explanations were given by Daly [7] to describe the development of communication apprehension, and they include (1) genetic predisposition, (2) feeling of helplessness, (3) history of reinforcements or punishments, (4) lack of appropriate models of communication and (5) inadequate acquisition of communication skills (See Figure 2). As stated by Horwitz et al. [3], communication apprehension can appear in the form of difficulty in speaking in public (stage fright) or in groups or pairs (oral communication anxiety) as well as in listening to a spoken message (receiver anxiety).

Figure 1. A pyramid model illustrating three types of performance anxieties suggested by Horwitz et al. [3] to be associated with foreign language anxiety.

Figure 2. Five explanations adopted from Daly [7] to describe the development of communication apprehension.

Horwitz et al. [3] defined that fear of negative evaluation is an anxiety about the evaluations of others, avoiding evaluative situations, along with the expectation that one would be negatively evaluated by others. While the fear of negative evaluation is similar to test anxiety, it has a broader scope and is not restricted to merely test-taking circumstances. It can manifest in any social or perceived evaluative circumstances like speaking in public or job interviews. Fear of negative evaluation is more likely to be experienced by foreign language learners when speaking to their peers in classrooms or to the teacher, who continuously assess their communication performance in a foreign language of which they have little mastery.

It should be borne in mind that foreign language anxiety is not a mere transformation of test anxiety, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, though these performance anxieties are related to it. Horwitz et al. [3] are of the opinion that foreign language anxiety should be considered as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors associated with classroom language learning which arises from the distinctiveness of the language learning process.

3. Relationships between Language Learning and Anxiety

Three possible relationships between anxiety and language learning, which include consequence, facilitation, and negative impact, were identified by Ellis [8] (See Figure 3).

In the first instance, anxiety may occur due to difficulties with language learning instead of being the cause [1] [9] or a consequence of difficulties in language learning [10]. In the second instance, language performance may be positively affected by anxiety if learners are motivated and emotionally encouraged to accomplish whatever they desire to achieve [2]. Although individuals with some anxiety may experience facilitative anxiety in language learning [8], concrete evidence of the facilitative effect is only provided in a few studies. In the third instance, negative feelings such as pressure and stress that hinder learning may be instigated by anxiety. Significant negative correlation between English learning achievement and foreign language anxiety has been consistently found in previous studies [1] [11] [12] [13]. Reviewing the relationship between language anxiety and achievement, Horwitz [1] concluded that poor language learning in some individuals is indeed caused by anxiety.

Figure 3. Three possible relationships between anxiety and language learning identified by Ellis [8].
4. Language Anxiety Sources

The negative impacts of anxiety on language learning have been suggested in many studies; therefore, it is important to understand the sources of language anxiety. The sources of language anxiety may vary with learning environments as well as learners. A summary of sources of anxiety in foreign language classrooms was given by Price [14], who discovered that students seemed to be mostly concerned about speaking the target language in the presence of their peers. A major cause of students’ anxiety in foreign language classrooms is the fear of being laughed at and embarrassed in public. The fear of making pronunciation errors, difficulty in their language classes and frustration of not being able to communicate effectively are other major sources of anxiety discovered by Price [14] from the interviews carried out on learners. She further affirmed that the roots of these sources might be the fear of others’ evaluation, learners’ beliefs, fear of public speaking and perfectionism.

Six potential sources of language anxiety were identified by Young [5] (See Figure 4). The first source is personal and interpersonal anxieties which involve low self-esteem and competitiveness, and they are mainly caused by the tension that learners feel when they assess themselves in imaginary or real social settings. Hence, anxieties caused by interpersonal and personal issues are also closely associated with communication apprehension and social anxiety, particularly in language learning settings where interpersonal assessment regularly occurs [15]. The learners’ beliefs about language learning are the second source of anxiety identified by Young [5]. According to Horwitz [16], language anxiety is possibly caused by some unrealistic beliefs that learners have towards a successful language learning (e.g., mastering a language within a short period of time, obtaining a native-like utterance and accent, being able to translate to and from the target language). The third source is the instructors’ beliefs towards language teaching. Learners are likely to be anxious especially in learning environments where the instructors believe that language should be learned in an authoritative and/or teacher-orientated classroom. In consideration of the fact that the learning environment set up by instructors in classroom learning is often reflective of their teaching beliefs, this leads to the fourth source – instructor-learner interactions. Instructor-learner interactions is the fourth source of anxiety as a harsh manner of interaction between the learners and the instructor may easily ignite learning anxiety. For example, the responses of learners to error-correction were discussed by Young [5], who indicated that it is the manner of error correction (i.e., when, how, and how often the teacher makes a correction) that contributes to learners’ anxiety. Young [5] identified classroom procedures as the fifth source of anxiety because certain classroom practices like making it mandatory to speak a foreign language in front of an audience or being forced to participate frequently in peer discussions often lead to classroom language learning anxiety. The six source of anxiety is language testing. In response to certain language test items, or in other test-related circumstances, learners may become frustrated (e.g. preparing for and taking tests with unusual content or format).

5. Coping with Language Anxiety

In previous literature, attention was given to how to cope with language anxiety. However, the suggestions given by researchers are usually centered on how teachers can modify their teaching techniques to assist learners to deal with language anxiety. For example, it was suggested by Horwitz and Young [4] that teachers should create a more learner-friendly and relaxed learning environment in the classrooms by adopting anxiety-reducing classroom activities such as games. In the same way, Burgoon [18] suggested a few strategies for teachers to apply when their students are...
experiencing reticence or communication anxiety in classrooms. For example, teachers can use meaning-oriented tasks, or encourage students to think positively about their contribution when communicating in classrooms. It is should be noted that the coping techniques recommended by these scholars are based on reviews of previous literature. In addition, the issue was not addressed by these scholars from learners’ perspectives.

It was not until the last two decades that how learners coped with language anxiety was examined from learners’ perspective. According to Huang [19], EFL graduate students were able to cope with language anxiety by practicing with peers in advance, asking for assistance from their professors, and acquainting themselves with the learning environment. Leki [20] did an investigation on writing apprehension, and observed that learners could deal with their anxiety about writing by postponing writing assignments to the last minute, avoiding situations involving writing or completing unavoidable writing tasks quickly. Bodie [21] investigated speaking anxiety, and he found that exposing speakers to the same group of audience over a time period decreased their speaking anxiety. However, he did not consider the anxiety experience of speakers in different speaking circumstances to identify the main factors associated with the decrease in anxiety. Huang [17] examined the perspectives of Taiwanese university students and found that there was a negative correlation between the efficacy of coping strategy applied by the students and their anxiety levels in foreign language learning. Kao and Craigie [22] provided more insightful details regarding five coping strategies applied by the students and their relationships with foreign language learning anxiety. They discovered that thinking positively could be the most effective strategy to combat foreign language learning anxiety, while giving up would cause the opposite effect.

The previous literature sheds light on the complicated nature of coping with foreign language anxiety. Given its complexity, more work needs to be done to increase the understanding of this issue. A rarely-explored research direction is coping resources. What resources do learners and teachers have for coping, and how are these resources related to coping? There does not appear to be many studies that have elicited learners’ perceptions of coping resources.

6. Conclusion

This study comprehensively reviews previous literature regarding the relationship between anxiety and language, sources of language anxiety, and how individuals cope with it. The multifaceted nature of anxiety in the learning of foreign language was reviewed, explored, analysed, and critiqued. In addition, how individuals cope with language anxiety was also examined. It is hoped that this study serves as an important avenue to the understanding of language and anxiety as well as leverage for future researchers to conduct further investigations.

References


